Who is afraid of citizen journalists?

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Disasters, whether natural or man-made, used to be phenomena that we read about, saw on the television or heard on the radio *after* they happened. Even the advent of cable TV and 24 hour news channels did not change this.

Unexpected or unplanned, no one could accurately predict where or when they would occur. Once they did, our first images and sounds usually used to be of ambulances rushing into hospital with the injured and the dead; bloody, ashen or mud-stained emergency workers and survivors emerging from the chaos; an aerial shot over the disaster area; an image zoomed in to focus on a single detail (a broken toy, a frozen clock or a single shoe); an animation depicting the lead-up to the disaster and how it played out; sound-bites from traumatized victims and various spokespersons; or a news anchor struggling to be heard above the din of relief work. Headlines the next day would scream out the numbers dead alongside an image of the tragedy -- shot by a professional photographer and purchased for hundreds of dollars.

Large-scale disasters are growing. On the one hand, global warming and unprecedented environmental change are resulting in disasters more frequent and calamitous than before. Natural disasters such as earthquakes (Kashmir, 2005), floods (Bangladesh, India and Nepal, 2007), landslides and mudslides (Bam, 2003; Chittagong, 2007), volcanic eruptions (Merapi, 2006), tsunamis (South and Southeast Asia, 2005) and forest fires (across Europe, 2007) continue to severely affect the lives and livelihoods of millions. On the other, the iconic images of the London bombings (7 July 2006), the Twin Towers in New York on 11 September 2001, Madrid train bombs (2004) and the Bali bombings (2002 and 2005) coupled with hundreds of gruesome local incidents -- including suicide bombings in countries such as Sri Lanka, Afghanistan and Iraq -- are a stark reminder that man made disasters, often the result of terrorism, are a permanent feature of domestic life in many countries.

But how do we make sense of such disasters -- their causes, their impact on those involved as victims and perpetrators? How do we maintain compassion in a world with competing human tragedies? Does the increasing availability and affordability of Information and Communications Technologies (ICT) -- covering PCs, radio, mobile phones, blogs, SMS and the Internet -- result in the coverage and awareness of disasters qualitatively better than before? Or does reportage across a hundred thousand websites and blogs by those who are untrained in professional journalism diminish the importance of and, by extension, the response towards a disaster?

There are no easy answers to these questions. Whether we like it or not, new technologies are changing the manner in which we gather, store, disseminate, consume and comment on news. The overall experience after the tsunami in Sri Lanka and the subsequent design of ICTs for humanitarian aid suggests that ordinary citizens can play a pivotal role in facilitating the flow of information in relief and conflict management mechanisms.

What has changed? Let's take the scenario in the first paragraph. Today, professional photographers still take celebrated images, but now have to compete with citizens with digital cameras in their mobile phones who are often the first to arrive, or already present at the scene. We could call this victim journalism.

The first images of the London bombings (7 July 2006) were not from broadcast quality video cameras of TV networks or the high end cameras of photojournalists. They were grainy, jittery images and video taken from mobile phones by citizens, many of whom were victims of the bombings. For hours after the bombings, this visceral footage was shown repeatedly on the BBC as well as other news networks globally.

SMS to the rescue

The web is littered with examples on how SMS (Short Message Service, often called text messages) helped in the immediate aftermath of the tsunami in Indonesia and Sri Lanka[1]. For example:
- *I'm standing on the Galle road in Aluthgama and looking at 5 ton trawlers tossed onto the road. Scary shit.*
- *Found 5 of my friends, 2 dead. Of the 5, 4 are back in Colombo. The last one is stranded because of a broken bridge. Broken his leg. But he's alive. Made...*
- *..contact. He got swept away but swam ashore. Said he's been burying people all day. Just dragging them off the beach and digging holes with his hands. Go..*

An enduring lesson in this regard was that since SMS is more resilient to mass scale destruction of telecoms infrastructure[2], it can be the foundation for early warning systems[3] and as a key alerting tool for communities at risk[4]. For example, the Dutch government is testing a mobile phone danger alert system that sends text messages to people who could be affected by natural disasters or terrorist attacks. The system, called Cell Broadcast, uses GSM technology to identify cell phone users in a particular area.

Here are four other examples of citizens using SMS:

- Some governments are finding it hard to control the flow of information on inept and inadequate responses to disasters[5]. SMS became an important tool in 2003 in China when it was used to spread information on the SARS epidemic. And although the spread of false information hampered relief efforts and sometimes created mass panic, SMS was a vehicle through which citizens exchanged information that the Chinese government wanted to suppress.

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[1] http://www.boingboing.net/2004/12/27/smses_from_sri_lanka.html and
http://www.boingboing.net/2005/01/01/nyt_sms_as_warning_s.html
[2] http://www.lirneasia.net/2007/08/another-instance-of-voice-failing-and-sms-triumphing-during-disasters/
[3] http://www.lirneasia.net/2005/01/sms-as-part-of-early-warning-system (and also the interesting comments that follow the original post)
[4] http://www.textually.org/textually/archives/2005/01/006698.htm

[5] http://www.cnn.com/2005/TECH/11/09/dutch.disaster.warning/index.html

- In the aftermath of the devastating earthquake on the Indonesian island of Java in May 2006, which killed over 5,000 and left 1.6 million homeless, mobile phones quickly became mobile news services for journalists covering the recovery efforts. International media support group Internews worked with more than 180 Indonesian journalists to establish a quick, low-cost text messaging service that enabled local radio stations to report on humanitarian relief[6].

- In Sri Lanka, mobile phone totting citizens are requested to send in news and situation reports to JasmineNewsWires (JNW), a service set up to broadcast news updates through SMS. These messages are parsed into a news feed on the web, making it easy to access information in real time on everything from traffic conditions, street violence at political rallies and field reports from the embattled regions in the North and East of Sri Lanka.

"My name is Mohammed Sokor, writing to you from Dagahaley refugee camp in Dadaab. Dear Sir, there is an alarming issue here. People are given too few kilograms of food. You must help." The Economist (26 July 2007) carried an article[7] that began with this quote as an example of how the relationship between victims and aid agencies has changed on account of the mobile phone. It shows how mobile phones could be used to strengthen the quality and responsiveness of aid work because of the accountability and transparency of aid operations it fosters amongst beneficiaries, governments, civil society and donors.

Citizens bearing witness

In Sri Lanka, citizen journalism initiatives such as Groundviews[8] and *Vikalpa*[9] elicit content from ordinary citizens with little or no training in journalism. The contributors attempt to humanise violent conflict, support peace and reconciliation and expose the growing divide between that which the Government and other warring parties promise and actually do. In fact, citizen journalists are increasingly playing a major role in meaningfully reporting deaths, the humanitarian fallout and hidden social costs of violent conflict, often glossed over or sensationalised by traditional media.

If we expand our definition of disasters to encompass failed or failing states, or regions with a clear democratic deficit, initiatives that record human rights abuses in the form of photos, videos and short stories produced by ordinary citizens through mobile devices and PCs are hugely important. The Human Rights Video Hub[10], run by WITNESS and Global Voices, is a powerful example. Another is how Nepali citizens used blogs to restore de-

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[6] http://www.internews.org/prs/2006/20061019_indo.shtm

[7] http://www.economist.com/world/international/displaystory.cfm?story_id=9546242

[8] http://www.groundviews.lk

[9] http://www.vikalpa.org

[10] http://globalvoicesonline.org/-/human-rights-video/

mocracy from the disastrous rule of the Monarchy that led to hundreds of deaths and gross human rights abuses[11].

Such initiatives - simple yet effective - can help strengthen accountability, expose corruption, help in the restoration of democracy and support governance mechanisms responsive to the needs of citizens.

Mainstream news organizations are taking note - today, citizens across the world are actively encouraged to submit their "palm-grown" content through dedicated portals on Reuters, AP, BBC, CNN, Al-Jazeera and many other major networks[12]. Much of the real time footage coming from disasters on these networks are actually those captured by citizens and mobile devices. The growth of high speed internet access in many countries around the world has also resulted in this growth - it is now possible to stream video in real time from many places in the world. This opens up the potential for new perspectives and insights into disasters - instead of one TV crew, we now have a thousand, all of them recording, bearing witness and publishing.

New media through ICTs have also given rise to new ways of visualising disasters - activists now use tools such as Google Earth to highlight the enormity of human tragedy in places such as Darfur[13].

Many challenges

But is it all good and positive? Put another way, merely because we now have access to a hundred times more content on a disaster than before does not mean that we get any closer to understanding it or responding to it.

Information overload is a real problem, as is the subjectivity of citizens, who only capture what they feel is important and often ignore aspects to a disaster beyond their own comfort zone and prejudices. There is still no widely accepted standard for citizen journalists, though organizations such as the Centre for Citizen Media are actively working towards such standards[14].

There are other challenges associated with citizen journalism, especially in a context of violent conflict. This author receives vicious hate mail, suffers public insults, is branded a 'terrorist' and even receives the occasional death threat – all because of the content he promotes on the citizen journalism websites he edits.

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[11] http://www.asiamedia.ucla.edu/article.asp?parentid=21285

[12] http://ict4peace.wordpress.com/2006/12/07/new-media-in-cycles-of-violence-using-technology-for-new-voices/

[13] http://ict4peace.wordpress.com/2007/04/12/darfur-through-google-earth-the-reality-of-conflict-through-crisis-in-darfur/ is one example, of a growing number, of the use of multimedia rich mapping tools such as Google Earth to help visualise the otherwise difficult to comprehend enormity of humanitarian crises such as Darfur.

[14] http://www.citmedia.org/principles

Not all citizens, even when they can do so and have access to digital devices, record disasters or human rights abuses - especially when their own security could be compromised for having done so. Governments can also clamp down hard on citizen journalism. The French Constitutional Council approved a law in early 2007 that criminalizes the filming or broadcasting of acts of violence by people other than professional journalists. The law could lead to the imprisonment of eyewitnesses who film acts of police violence, or operators of Web sites publishing the images.[15] Sri Lanka unofficially banned a pro-Tamil nationalist website[16] in 2007 and regularly cuts off mobile phone and Internet services in the North and East of the country[17]. Scared by the potential for embarrassment, political debacles and popular uprisings, countries such as Egypt, Iran, Cuba, North Korea and China vigorously censor and monitor content on blogs and exchanges through SMS, prompting Julien Pain, head of the Internet freedom desk at Reporters Without Borders (RSF) to note[18]: *"… all authoritarian regimes are now working to censor the Web, even countries in sub-Saharan Africa. The Ethiopian regime of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi has blocked openly critical Web sites and blogs since May 2006, and President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe is considering a law allowing security forces to intercept online messages without reference to the courts. One of the first moves by Thailand's military rulers after their September (2006) coup was to censor news Web sites, even foreign ones, that criticized the takeover."*

It is a significant challenge for citizen journalists to cover disasters and conflict in such contexts. What is essential here is to identify the social and organisational contexts in which the technology is implemented. It is true that the evidence of the use of ICTs in disaster management and early warning is growing[19]. It is also true that mobile devices are increasingly powerful because they are pervasive, personal and capable of authoring content[20]. However, like any other tool, they can lie unused, used for purposes they were not intended for, misused or only used for personal gain. There is no guarantee that images and photos from disasters produced by victims in the thick of it will galvanise attention and support.

ICTs can also merely serve to strengthen hierarchies and bureaucracy that impede accountability and responsive aid delivery. In Sri Lanka, the significant deterioration of democracy in 2006-2007 has resulted in a country where anxiety and fear overwhelm a sense of civic duty to bear witness to so much of what is wrong. No amount of mobile phones and PCs is going to magically erase this deep rooted fear of harm for speaking one's mind out. And too often, the victims of disasters and the beneficiaries of aid still continue to languish in camps and suffer the effects of ill-planned relief mechanisms.

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[15] http://www.macworld.com/news/2007/03/06/franceban/index.php?lsrc=mwrss

[16] http://freemediasrilanka.org/index.php?action=con_news_full&id=625&section=news

[17] http://freemediasrilanka.org/index.php?action=con_news_full&id=443&section=news

[18] http://news.com.com/2010-1028_3-6155582.html?part=rss&tag=2547-1_3-0-20&subj=news
[19] http://ict4peace.pbwiki.com/

[20] http://www.worldchanging.com/archives/006458.html

I posed at the beginning of this essay a difficult question on how we can maintain compassion in a world with competing human tragedies. The stories of trauma, suffering , loss of humanity, and gross human rights abuses are not easy to digest or comprehend. Yet, sometimes without a single word of commentary, they can show us hope and compassion. They are a vital record and bear witness to events and processes that shape our world and worldview. They archive voices that die or are killed. They show us images and tell us stories we need to listen and respond to.

Disasters are about resilience - how we pick ourselves up after a human tragedy and slowly return to normalcy. ICTs help us understand how we can help communities spring back to life after a disaster. They humanise a tragedy, the scale of which may be too large to otherwise comprehend. Citizen journalists, flawed as they may be as individuals, are nevertheless tremendously powerful as a group. They have the potential to capture, over the long term, a multiplicity of rich and insightful perspectives on disasters not often covered by the traditional media.

My response to conflict and disasters in violent and failing states is to suggest the strong potential of citizen journalism to promote a better understanding of disasters, their causes and impact. We cannot wait for the rest of the world to wake up to the potential of citizen journalism to better respond to disasters. My experience in fostering new media frameworks and citizen journalism is that significant challenges can be overcome through the resilience and commitment of citizens to democracy. Often, all they want is to be heard. All we need to do is to awaken in them the imagination to use mobile devices and PCs to bear witness to what they feel is wrong.

We cannot prevent or predict all disasters. However, we can plan for, react to and learn from disasters when they do occur. Citizen journalism, ICT and new media are already helping in many ways in this endeavour.